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AUTHOR	Colbeck, Carol L.; Caffrey, Helen Spangler; Heller, Donald E.; Lattuca, Lisa R.; Reason, Robert; Strauss, Linda C.; Terenzini, Patrick T.; Volkweinm, J. Fredericks; Reindl, Travis
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ABSTRACT

This document addresses issues of concern to higher education today, namely student success (particularly of underrepresented students) and accreditation and quality assurance. Regarding research and practice in the area of student success, the report discusses strategies that promote persistence, transfer, and completion throughout the K-16 pipeline, within institutions, between colleges, and in student financial aid. Regarding accreditation in higher education, the report addresses its role, history, mechanisms, contexts, and trends. (EV)

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What Works

policy seminar on student success, accreditation and quality assurance

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American Association of State Colleges and Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW • Fifth Floor • Washington, DC 20005-4701
202.293.7070 • fax 202.296.5819 • **aascu.org**

Pennsylvania State University Center for the Study of Higher Education
400 Rackley Building • University Park, PA 16802-3202
814.865.6346 • fax 814.865.3638 • **ed.psu.edu/cshe/index.htm**

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August 2003

What Works

policy seminar on student success, accreditation and quality assurance

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What Works

to enhance student success in college

A Summary of Research and Practice

In recent years, the issues of college access and graduation have risen significantly on the policy agenda, particularly the question of how college opportunity and benefits can be extended to populations most at risk of nonparticipation. As the economic and social capital associated with a college degree has risen, federal and state debates over access have proliferated and grown more heated: witness the current concern over rising tuition and affirmative action in admissions.

Access, however, is only part of the equation. Perhaps more important–and often rarely recognized–are issues surrounding student success. These issues are increasingly attracting the interest of policymakers, who ask why the postsecondary education pipeline is leaking a significant portion of its students. This leaky pipeline has prompted the call for institutions to expand their attention to tracking student persistence, transfer, and completion.

The fact that the nation's colleges and universities will experience considerable, in some cases dramatic, growth over the next decade, magnify the urgency of these calls. The growth will be predominantly among groups that have historically encountered the highest hurdles between high school and college graduation (underrepresented students of color, low-income students, first-generation students). At the same time near- and longer- term fiscal forecasts do not bode well for significant funding increases to serve these students. Such a "perfect storm" places a premium on careful targeting and coordination of policy and resources (human, financial, and informational).

Successful strategies that promote persistence, transfer, and completion can be found (1) throughout the educational K-16 pipeline; (2) within institutions; (3) between colleges (i.e. two- and four-year, technical-baccalaureate); and (4) in student financial aid. These programs generally target specific groups, such as underrepresented students and low-income students, or stages in the postsecondary process, such as college preparation or first-year seminars.

K-16 Educational Pipeline Strategies

A major research study, now in its second of three years, *The Dream Deferred: Increasing College Preparedness of At-Risk Students*, lead by Patrick Terenzini at Penn State University and funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, is investigating the strategies of integrated early intervention programs and their impact on student success. Matriculation to four-year colleges and universities involves three critical tasks: acquiring minimum academic skills, graduating from high school, and applying to a four-year institution. Approximately one-fifth of those who meet all three

Authors: Patrick Terenzini, Linda Strauss, Donald Heller, Helen Spangler Caffrey, Robert Reason, and Travis Reindl

criteria do not matriculate, possibly due to obstacles encountered between secondary and postsecondary institutions as well as due to financial barriers. Noted higher education analyst David Breneman places the issue in stark focus:

> *The artificial separation after grade 12 is increasingly seen as just that, artificial. As policies move in the direction of encouraging near-universal attendance beyond high school in some form of postsecondary education (and as lifelong learning becomes a reality rather than just a phrase), the financial, bureaucratic and policy divisions separating K-12 from higher education make less and less sense.*

Some policy researchers suggest a well-articulated K-16 plan would alleviate these barriers and create a seamless educational system from kindergarten through the undergraduate years. Statewide legislative intervention likely is necessary to encourage collaboration between a state's secondary and postsecondary systems. A recent report by The Bridge Project at Stanford University recommended a series of steps that states could take to better align states' K-12 and postsecondary education systems. A key recommendation is that states should "Examine the relationship between the content of postsecondary education placement exams and K-12 exit-level standards and assessments to determine if more compatibility is necessary and possible".

Intra-College Strategies

The more traditional approaches to student success generally address intra-college influences on persistence and degree completion, like differences in students' academic abilities, difficulties faced when adjusting to college, students' academic and social involvement, and financial limitations. While grades are a limited measure of student success in many respects, the research, consistently, shows that grades, above and beyond other factors, are a key predictor of student persistence and graduation. Nothing succeeds like "success." Academic performance is particularly important in students' first year of college, when most dropouts occur. Strategies that treat the educational pipeline as a complete system and provide an integrated approach (K-16 initiatives, GEARUP, Upward Bound) facilitate student success across the educational span through to the baccalaureate degree. Developmental studies and similar remedial programs appear to be at least somewhat effective in helping students overcome their pre-college deficiencies in academic preparation and related disadvantages. Supplemental Instruction (SI) programs are efforts that target "historically difficult" courses (i.e., those with chronically high drop out and failure rates like Calculus, Chemistry or Psychology) rather than individual students. The programs are multi-dimensional and augment course content. Such programs may increase persistence by as much as 10–15 percent. First-year seminars, by providing academically focused opportunities for new students and faculty members to interact in small groups, also facilitate various forms of academic and social integration and, thus, persistence.

"Learning communities" promote both academic and social integration and, thus, persistence, even when other factors like ability are controlled. An example of a learning community is the Penn State University "Pennypacker Experience." This program clusters first-year students, planning to major in technical areas in the same residence hall with academic support services integrated into the residential experience. The joint academic and student affairs administration of this program is one of its strengths.

Students' academic major field, net of other factors, also appears to affect persistence, graduation, and graduate school enrollment. Students majoring in

the sciences, engineering, business, and health-related professions are more likely to graduate than similar students in other majors. Students in programs that promise attractive employment and financial opportunities immediately after completion of the bachelor's degree are more likely to persist to graduation, however, also less likely to pursue graduate study.

Similarly, a campus's racial diversity and perceived climate for students of color also shapes persistence decisions. Perceptions of prejudice and discrimination discourage persistence for both students of color *and* their white peers alike. Comprehensive support and retention programs (i.e., those that deliver a wide array of academic and financial support services and assistance, but do so in a coordinated and integrated way) appear quite consistently to be effective in promoting student persistence. The beneficial effects persist even when dropout related factors are taken into account.

A 1997 study of the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) produced a "Best Practices" document that identified six common elements of exemplar programs:

A project-designated first-year experience for most or all participants. Students participate in extra-curricular or co-curricular projects that integrate adjustment to the institution along with experiential learning.

Emphasis on academic support for developmental and popular first-year courses. These support services (tutoring and group study) focus on the academic aspects with respect to the personal development of the student as they adjust to college-level work.

Extensive student service contacts. SSS counselors are available to students not only during traditional office hours, but also during the evenings and often on weekends. This ensures that students have support at different points in the day, often accommodating non-traditional schedules (due to work or family obligations).

Student targeting recruitment and motivation to participate in SSS. Exemplar programs use special recruitment processes such as essays and interviews that are more in-depth than traditional admissions policies. These methods assist staff in enrolling students who are motivated to succeed and deserving of the opportunity for SSS.

Dedicated staff and directors with strong institutional attachments. Program personnel have considerable administrative experiences within postsecondary education and hold other institutional positions, furthering the efforts of SSS programs to integrate students into the campus community.

Emphasis on inclusiveness. This is an opportunity to demonstrate that the institution is reaching out and serving a diverse array of students including students who have academic profiles that deviate from the majority of students enrolling as regular admits.

From both the theoretical and research literature on student development, one can identify successful elements of these strategies. These elements include development of critical skills, appropriate postsecondary academic habits, academic and social integration, peer support, as well as provision of personal counseling. These services enable students to reach their academic potential and to persist and graduate from their institutions. Additionally, these programs are flexible enough to accommodate childcare and work responsibilities of students,

offering institutions an opportunity to serve and support their communities. The benefits of these programs in terms of educational attainment come at a cost: they tend to be both human and financial resource-intensive.

Inter-College Strategies

Where one begins a postsecondary career continues to matter for educational attainment, even when a wide array of students' pre-college characteristics (including ability, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and motivation) are taken into account. Beginning pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a two-year rather than a four-year institution reduces one's chances of ultimately earning that degree by about 15-20 percentage points. Community college entrants, however, enjoy clear educational and occupational advantages in a variety of areas over those who never go to school beyond high school or who enroll for limited periods in a community college. The deciding event appears to be whether bachelor's degree-seeking community college students who want to transfer to a four-year institution actually do so. When that bridge is crossed, and net of other factors, those students are as likely as similar students beginning in four-year institutions to complete a bachelor's degree, although they may take somewhat longer to do so.

The bumps in the road for these students can be smoothed in several ways. Encouraging simultaneous admission and other articulation agreements, for example, contribute to academic progress towards the baccalaureate by allowing for easier transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. This strategy also leads to a more seamless higher education system. Other bumps are attributable to structural and procedural problems two-year students' encounter in transferring from a two- to a four-year institution.

Financial Strategies

The research on college access has consistently found that both finances and preparation for college during the middle and high school years are important factors in ensuring that underserved populations (largely poor and minority students) are able to enroll in and be successful in college. Need-based financial aid, and in particular, grants–whether provided by the federal government, state aid programs, or from institutions themselves–has been proven to be an important policy lever for helping these students attend college. Studies of the effects of financial aid on persistence and educational attainment are perhaps as voluminous, but far less consistent in their findings than are studies of other aspects of students' college experiences. The most consistent evidence indicates that financial aid reduces (if it does not eliminate) economic obstacles to obtaining a postsecondary credential, particularly for lower-income students. Aided students are as likely (perhaps slightly more likely) than unaided students (who tend to be more affluent and better prepared for college-level work) to persist and graduate. Additionally, financial aid affects not only students' access to postsecondary education, but also the nature of their experiences and the level of their academic and social involvement once enrolled. Both of those factors are strongly predictive of subsequent persistence and degree completion.

Grants and scholarships, in particular, appear with some consistency to have a net positive effect on persistence and degree attainment. The evidence is less consistent, but generally indicates that on-campus employment and loans (if not too large) have positive effects net of other factors and types of aid. An important word of caution here: much of the research on the impact of student loans was conducted before the large increase in student

indebtedness that has occurred over the last decade. Tuition, the number of hours worked off-campus, and unmet need (the difference between college costs and financial aid and family and student contributions) are all inversely related to persistence and degree completion.

Questions/Issues for Discussion

Leveraging Current Resources

What can be done within existing federal program structures and funding levels to reach more students and increase success rates? Do existing programs need to be significantly altered to reach these goals?

Promoting K-16 Approaches

What federal role, if any, exists in promoting a more seamless/K-16 approach to education delivery? If such a role exists, what form(s) does it take?

State/Federal Coordination

How can federal, state, and local efforts be better coordinated to maximize the impact of programs already in place? Who takes the first step toward better coordination and collaboration?

Financial Aid

What is an appropriate share of higher education funding responsibility for the federal government with respect to low-income, disadvantaged students? In other words, how much of the total cost of attendance at an "access-oriented" public institution should the federal government be expected to pick up through grants, loans, and work?

Resources

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What Works

to ensure quality in higher education institutions

A Summary of Accreditation's Role

For more than half a century, accreditation–both institutional and specialized–has played a central role in promoting accountability and quality assurance in American higher education. The process of accreditation, however, is not widely understood–or is viewed skeptically–by some of higher education's most important stakeholders. How (and how well) does accreditation work, and how can that information be more broadly communicated? How is the process changing to reflect new realities on and off campus? What role does federal policy play in facilitating that change? Answers to these questions are essential to maintaining a strong, adaptive quality assurance system in American higher education.

History of Accreditation

In contrast to other countries, which control higher education institutions through a centralized ministry or other national agency, colleges and universities in the U.S. operate fairly independently. The U.S. Constitution is silent on the subject of education and its Tenth Amendment says all powers not specifically delegated to the federal government are reserved for the states. Thus, the Department of Education does not accredit individual institutions or academic programs. The 1819 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Trustees of Dartmouth College v Woodward* case stated that incorporation of an institution under government charter did not bring it under government control. Nevertheless, the federal role in supporting higher education has been and continues to be significant, ranging from the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, the G.I. Bill of 1944 and the many agencies created to bolster research capacities and funding of student financial aid.

Accreditation began when colleges and universities decided around the turn of the 19th Century to establish minimum standards for admissions and course equivalencies (to permit the transfer of credits from one institution to another). Accreditation took on an additional role after World War II and passage of the G.I. Bill, when accrediting agencies were required to determine the eligibility of institutions for federal research and financial funds. In 1996, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was established by degree granting institutions to coordinate accreditation activity. CHEA membership includes all degree-granting colleges and universities that pay a membership fee and are accredited by their regional accreditation bodies–approximately 3,000 institutions of higher education. CHEA does not accredit individual institutions or academic programs; its mission is to promote greater public accountability, to increase the importance and usefulness of non-governmental accreditation, and to improve the practice of accreditation.

Authors: J. Fredericks Volkwein, Lisa Lattuca, Helen Spangler Caffrey, and Travis Reindl

Overview of Accreditation

Driven by a diverse economy and society, higher education is now a complex industry of public and private education providers, and an array of quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms have evolved reflecting this complexity. Accreditation and quality assurance activity focuses on three major levels–institutional, programmatic, and individual. Table 1 summarizes the key actors taking responsibility at each of these three levels.

At the **institutional or campus level**, the dominant vehicle for promoting accountability and quality assurance is the voluntary process designed collaboratively by the member institutions of the six regions–New England, Middle States, Southern, North Central, Northwest, and Western. Each of the regional accrediting bodies has developed (and frequently enhances) elaborate processes for the conduct of institutional self-study, review, and re-accreditation. Regional accreditation is a process based on self-review and peer assessment. It is comprehensive in scope, covering an institution's financial status, governance, faculty and staff relations and achievements, student services, and student learning outcomes. Reviews are conducted on a periodic basis, on cycles of five to ten years (shorter cycles are used in the case of serious problems within an institution).

At the **program level**, the picture is more complicated. Specialized disciplines and professions, now totaling 100 fields of study, scrutinize and accredit officially recognized programs to ensure the quality of their courses and degrees and to protect against unethical or fraudulent activities. Most campus strategic plans now call for an assessment of internal strengths and weaknesses matched against an assessment of external constraints and opportunity. Thus, nearly every campus has developed its own program review and quality control measures, often coordinating these internal reviews with those of the specialized discipline/profession. In addition to the internal academic program review processes, there are state-mandated reviews of individual programs in many parts of the nation.

At the **individual level**, there is an array of mechanisms for credentialing, licensing, and certifying professional and vocational practitioners in fields such as accounting, law, medicine, engineering, architecture, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, social work, and teaching. Some of these "accreditations" take the form of national or state examinations, internships or clinical experiences, or a combination of these.

Table 1. The Levels of Accreditation/Quality Assurance and Primary Responsibility for Action

	Accreditation/Quality Assurance Actors			
Levels of Review	**Regional**	**State**	**Specialized**	**Campus Governance**
Individual		X	X	X
Program		X	X	X
Institution	X			X

Accreditation Mechanisms

In general, the procedures for institutional and program level accreditation, although conducted by different accrediting associations, are similar. Most include two basic mechanisms for gathering and assessing evidence of quality: self-study and expert, or peer review.

Institutional or Campus Level Processes–The institutional re-accreditation process typically includes three components: (1) a self-study, prepared by the college or university to be reviewed, that responds to the evaluation criteria established by the accreditation body; (2) a visit by a team of trained peer evaluators from other higher education institutions who gather additional evidence; and (3) a decision by the accreditation body to accredit, accredit with conditions, or not to accredit the institution or program under review.

Each institutional re-accreditation often begins three years before the review, with negotiations over the nature of the review, the focus of the self-study, the collection of evidence, and the composition of the visiting team. For an example of an institutional review in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges region see Figure A. This is a long, two-stage review cycle that first judges institutional capacity, then institutional effectiveness. After the four-year process is completed, the institution, if all goes well, starts preparing for the next review cycle about six years after the commission action (sooner if all does not go well).

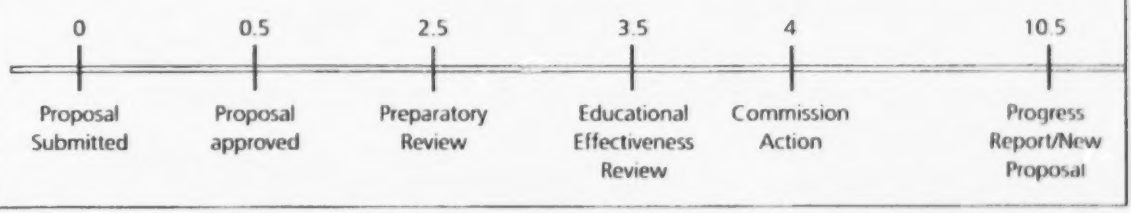
The faculty, administrators, and staff of the college or university, using a set of standards established by the accreditation organization, conduct the self-study component of the accreditation review. The process of collecting information and writing the self-study document generally begins more than two years before the accreditation visit occurs. The team of peer evaluators (often called a site visit team) is composed of faculty and administrators from peer colleges and universities who are selected by the accrediting organization. Following a campus visit in which the team members interview faculty and staff, the team writes a report that summarizes their assessment of the quality of the education offered and the structures that support it, including a recommendation on whether to accredit or re-accredit. A group of peer faculty and professionals, who comprise an external "commission" of the accreditation organization, review the evidence and the site team's recommendation and render a final judgment. This decision is communicated to the institution. There is also a public announcement; the six regional accrediting boards provide information about institutions reviewed in a given period and about the accreditation status of institutions in their region.

Program Level Processes–Quality assurance and accreditation at the program or department level within institutions often follows a similar process of self-study, site visits by professional experts, and final report and recommendations for action. Nearly every campus administration and governance body has long-established internal processes of academic program evaluation. Figure B shows the typical campus procedures for an internal review of established academic programs. Such reviews include the generation of a self-study, the selection of external reviewers, a site visit, and a report followed by responses, analysis, recommendations, and administrative action. The total review process from beginning to end often takes two years and sometimes three.

In addition to these self-designed reviews, there are program accreditation reviews required by about 100 different specialized academic and vocational accrediting bodies and professional societies ranging

Figure A

New WASC Institutional Review Cycle (in years)



The Proposal Includes

- Statement of Institutional Context
- Description of expected outcomes
- Description of how constituencies were involved
- Description of how the Preparatory and Educational Effectiveness Reviews will be staged
- For the Preparatory Review, a brief description of how evidence will be presented, including the proposed format of presentation and identification of key indicators in the institutional portfolio
- For the Educational Effectiveness Review, a description of the proposed model, special emphases, and ways the institution will address student learning
- An Institutional Stipulation Statement

The Preparatory Review Report—Focuses on Core Commitment 1 to Institutional Capacity

(limited to 35 pages of text, exclusive of exhibits and appendices)

Includes:

- Introduction, including changes in context since the Proposal
- Institutional Portfolio
  - ✣ Basic Descriptive Data
  - ✣ Set 0 Stipulated Policies (Appendix 1)
  - ✣ Set of exhibits and data displays
- Reflective Essays indicating what the portfolio exhibits mean to the institution
- Concluding Essay
- Appendix with institution's response to previous team and commission concerns

The Eucationa Effectiveness Report—Focuses on Core Commitment 2 Educational Effectiveness

(limited to 50 pages of text, exclusive of exhibits and appendices)

Includes:

- A description of the Educational Effectiveness approach
- Deep engagement and analysis of Educational Effectiveness such as:
  - Several analytical essays (for a Special Themes Model)
  - A single, extended essay (for a comprehensive or Audit Model)
  - Supporting evidence for the analysis of Educational Effectiveness, building on the Institutional Portfolio prepared for the Preparatory Review
  - An Integrative Component

from music to business, engineering to journalism, librarianship to nursing, forestry to physical therapy, and podiatry to theology. Professional organizations in many fields set standards for program accreditation and institutions meet them because accredited programs attract the best students. These program approvals and accreditations follow a similar process of compiling evidence in a self-study, selecting external reviewers who visit the campus and report, analyzing responses and recommendations, and reaching an accreditation decision. Each professional program self-study and accreditation review process lasts 12-36 months and may cost several hundred thousand dollars. Large universities typically have between 10 and 30 accrediting relationships, so they are either preparing for or experiencing several such reviews each year. In recent years, the regional accreditation bodies, as well as specialized accreditors have been working with institutions to develop accreditation reviews that align with institutional quality and strategic planning initiatives at the campus level. Institutions may negotiate with their accreditation organization for a more focused review (for example, on the quality of teaching and learning at the institution).

All states charter institutions of higher education, but the 50 states have variable arrangements, review mechanisms, and authority for higher education. Among the 50 states, there are nineteen different state structural arrangements for governance and coordination ranging from highly centralized boards with broad budget and program to very decentralized or even nonexistent coordinating structures–with a variety of hybrids models between these extremes. Among the more centralized and powerful state models, several have initiated review processes for examining the cost and quality of degree programs. Some of these embrace only graduate and professional programs; others include both graduate and undergraduate programs. Figure C diagrams the complex review process in one such state where a single favorable review took a minimum of two years to complete, and an unfavorable review with appeals and attempts to resuscitate the program occupied the better part of four years.

Contexts for Accreditation

Historically, higher education in the United States has been responsive to the needs of our democratic society for educated citizens, to the needs of the economy for an educated workforce, and to the needs of individuals who seek professional credentials. As a result, colleges and universities vary in terms of mission, sources of funding, size, student body characteristics, curricula, administrative structure and complexity, and resources. Among the most influential constituencies of the higher education enterprise are industry and the employment sector with its vast number and kinds of occupations and dynamic labor markets. To be successful, higher education depends on its ability to meet the needs and requirements of individuals of different economic statuses, ages, occupational goals, educational aspirations, educational preparation, and family circumstances. These same forces–employers and students–drive curricular diversity as colleges and universities attempt to serve the needs of their local, regional, and/or national communities, and the needs of current and prospective students through an array of academic programs and courses.

The diversity of educational arrangements–academic programs, general education requirements, academic calendars, non-degree and degree programs, to name a few–devised to meet industry and student demands, translate into a need for an equally-responsive accreditation process. A prescriptive set of standards cannot be applied to the many different kinds of academic programs and institutions developed to meet the various needs of students and industry. The diversification of the American higher education

Figure B

Campus Procedures for Internal Review of Established Academic Programs

I. Self-Study Document

- The evidence indicating the quality of the curriculum, faculty, and students
- The record of achievement of program
- The anticipated future of the program and the discipline
- The contribution and centrality of the program to the missions and goals of the campus and the state
- The contribution of the program to other fields of study at the graduate and upper division undergraduate levels
- The enrollment, financial, and facilities resources required to develop or maintain the strength of the program

II. Selection of External Scholar-Reviewers

- Recommendation by Department and Dean
- Selection by Graduate and Undergraduate Dean
- Criteria: National Reputation, Located outside State
- Balance between familiarity and detachment

III. Site Visit Report

- Program Effectiveness, Need, and Recommendations

IV. Evaluation & Recommendation

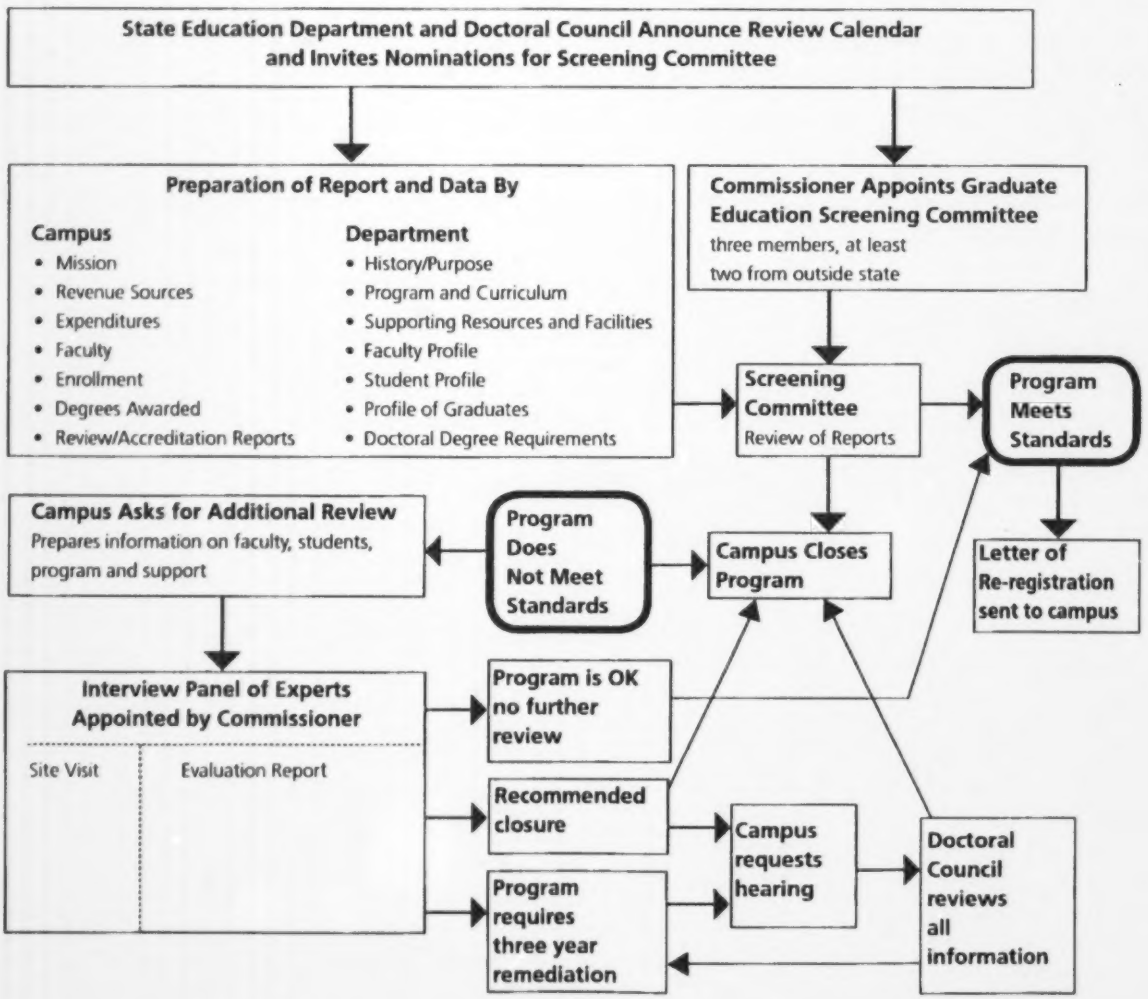
- Response to report by Dean/Department
- Analysis by Review Committee
- Report to Faculty Governance
- Recommendations to Vice President and Dean

V. Actions by Department, Dean Vice President and President

enterprise, even if limited to considerations of institutional scale and scope, greatly complicates the process of accreditation.

During the past two decades colleges and universities have adopted corporate management innovations and practices such as Management By Objectives (MBO), Program Planning and Budgeting Systems (PPBS), Zero Based Budgeting (ZBB), Total Quality Management (TQM), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), Generally Accepted Accounting Principals (GAAP), strategic planning, business process re-engineering, benchmarking, outsourcing, data warehousing, and performance accountability. While the administrative side of the campus has attempted to improve management, the academic side of the campus has undertaken quality improvement via program review, curricular restructuring, outcomes assessment, instructional technology, academic audits, and professional accreditation. College and university experiments with these management and academic trends have come largely in response to two dominant forces that are at work in higher education–the pressure

Figure C
State Mandated Review Process



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to become more efficient and reduce operating costs versus the pressure to become more effective and improve quality.

The competition between these two simultaneous pressures is further complicated by the fact that there are at least three separate models or philosophies about what it is that constitutes educational excellence. First, the academic community traditionally embraced the Resource/Reputation Model. This model emphasizes the importance of financial resources, faculty credentials, student test scores, external funding, and ratings and rankings. Second, the finance and business community generally holds to the Strategic Investment Model. This model emphasizes the importance of return on investment, cost-benefit analysis, expenditure controls, regulation and compliance, and productivity measures such as admissions yield, graduation rates, time to degree, and expenditures per student. Third, many parents, students, and student affairs professionals cling to a Client Centered Model. This model emphasizes good educational practices, student satisfaction, faculty availability, alumni feedback, low tuition and high aid. These models compete for attention and priority not only on the campus, but within accreditation bodies as well.

In addition, colleges and universities face a complex and expanding set of federal and state regulations. In some states, financial and personnel transactions at public colleges and universities receive redundant scrutiny by central system offices, legislative committees, and state executive staff. There are now a myriad of state and federal regulations and reporting requirements related to affirmative action, those with disabilities, athletics, freedom of information, campus crime, financial accounting requirements, purchasing practices, personnel benefits, payroll transactions, research involving human subjects, research involving warm blooded animals, student financial aid, student privacy rights, etc. Responding to these regulatory requirements has caused significant additional hiring and reallocation of staff in recent years.

Trends in Accreditation

Higher education institutions developed the first accreditation agencies in the late 1800s to ensure quality control of the enterprise. The community of accreditation associations has expanded dramatically since that time, but has remained true to its original purposes to serve higher education and the public. Accreditation philosophies, assumptions, procedures, and strategies have changed with the times as accreditation agencies have sensed new needs and pressures in the higher education community. The innovations discussed in this section attest to the self-correcting nature of the accreditation system, which has voluntarily pursued improvements that target greater institutional effectiveness and increased student learning.

One clear trend, now quite widespread as a regional practice for institutional re-accreditation, is embedding the accreditation review and its products in ongoing institutional processes. In order to make the review more cost-effective, as well as to increase the benefits associated with these costly reviews, campuses and accrediting bodies alike have begun to base their accreditation self-studies and reviews on existing processes (like strategic planning or program evaluation or student services or enrollment management), rather than to generate a one-time, stand alone self-study document that evaporates as soon as the site visit team leaves the campus. Most of the six regional accrediting bodies allow institutions to elect this review option. In New York, the State University at Albany received praise for its focus on student outcomes assessment, and the University

of California at Davis concentrated effectively on the twin themes of undergraduate research and educational technology in its recent re-accreditation.

A second clear trend is that accreditation bodies, not only at the regional level, but also in many disciplines (like engineering and business), have shifted their policies and processes away from meeting rigid quantitative standards for inputs and resources, and toward judging educational effectiveness from measurable outcomes. This shift was led by several of the regional accreditors (most prominently Middle States, North Central, and Western), who revised their manuals and review processes to give greater attention to student learning outcomes and program goal attainment as the institution's demonstration of its educational effectiveness. These trends began in the 1980s, but gathered strength during the 1990s as one accrediting group after another shifted away from bureaucratic checklist approaches that emphasized resources, curricular requirements, facilities, faculty credentials, and seat time, instead now focusing their reviews on attaining educational objectives, particularly those related to student learning outcomes. The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), which is on the forefront on the outcomes-based accreditation movement, is also leading efforts to determine the extent to which outcomes-based accreditation contributes to better student learning and preparation for careers in engineering. ABET has commissioned The Center for the Study of Higher Education at Penn State University to conduct a national study, to be completed in 2005, of the impact of its new accreditation criteria on student learning.

A third related trend in accreditation is the greater emphasis on improvement. Outcomes assessment evidence is now the centerpiece of educational effectiveness, and using that evidence to improve is a hallmark of healthy institutions and programs. Regional and program accreditors alike are prodding all in higher education to build "cultures of evidence" that feed into continuous improvement systems. This trend is spreading and promises to foster self-renewing organizations. Perhaps the most dramatic example is North Central's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). AQIP integrates continuous improvement into a sequence of events that align with ongoing activities. The completion of the program will answer two over-arching AQIP criteria: Are you doing the right things–the things that are most important in order to achieve your institution's goals? Are you doing things right–effectively, efficiently, in ways that truly satisfy the needs of those you serve?

A fourth trend is using accreditation reviews as catalysts for institutional transformation. Progressive campus leaders increasingly are seizing the regional re-accreditation process as a "chariot for change." Rather than viewing the accrediting process as a burden or hurdle to be overcome, presidents, provosts, and deans are viewing the self-study and team visit as an opportunity to stimulate constructive change. One outstanding example of this strategy is Syracuse University (N.Y.), where the re-accreditation self-study and review took place in an atmosphere of strategic redirection, enrollment downsizing, budget and personnel retrenchment, and widespread academic and administrative restructuring. The University used the accreditation review for an honest appraisal of past weaknesses and to forge a concrete plan for addressing the next several years. In another case, the University of Vermont galvanized the collective efforts of the university community and energized the institution for strategic change and transformation.

A fifth trend, aimed at reducing the cost of these multiple accreditation processes, involves the combined or multiple visit model. This occurs when

several accrediting bodies agree to hold their campus site visits at the same time and the respective self-studies are coordinated, if not combined. Several universities like Binghamton and Drexel have experimented with this arrangement. Professor Fred Volkwein and a team of his students in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University have been examining the costs and benefits of the combined and separate accreditation review processes at two public and two private universities, and the initial evaluations suggest that campuses prefer combined visits, that the combined self-studies and visits are less costly, but that the specialized accreditation groups (like engineering and business) view them as less effective than separated reviews.

Conclusion

Understandings of higher education, student learning, and organizational effectiveness have evolved over time, and so have higher education's responses to industry, employer, and civic expectations. The result is more meaningful accreditation processes that better serve institutions and their consistencies. Innovative methods, which are often integrated into ongoing educational operations, have enhanced the information available from self-studies and peer reviews. As both accrediting associations and institutions address the need for a more transparent and responsive assessment process of their academic and administrative goals, there may be a melding of the trends mentioned above. Depending on the extent of internal and external stimuli, a hybrid model may be best able to address the two dominant forces that are at work in higher education–the pressure to become more efficient and reduce operating costs versus the pressure to become more effective and improve quality. While these continuous improvements are focused on strengthening the quality of the educational enterprise–and the accreditation process–public confidence would increase if the evidence from accreditation and subsequent responses from institutions were more readily available.

Questions/Issues for Discussion

Federal Role

Given the trends discussed above, what role should federal policy play in promoting quality assurance in higher education?

Transparency Focus

What aspects of the accreditation process need to be more clearly, publicly communicated to higher education's various stakeholders?

Accountability Interplay

How can efforts to bring greater transparency to accreditation complement (and not duplicate) existing state and federal accountability mechanisms?

Resources

Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Higher Education **(msache.org)**

New England Association of Schools and Colleges **(neasc.org)**

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Higher Education Learning Commission **(ncahigherlearningcommission.org)**

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Colleges **(cocnasc.org)**

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges **(sacscoc.org)**

Western Association of Schools and Colleges **(wascweb.org)**

Council for Higher Education Accreditation **(chea.org)**

Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology **(abet.org)**

AACSB International–The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business **(aacsb.edu)**

The State University at Albany–Karen Hitchcock, President

University of California at Davis–Patricia Turner, Vice Provost

Syracuse University–Michael Flusche, Associate Vice Chancellor

University of Vermont–Fred Curran, Director of Institutional Studies

Binghamton University–Mary Ann Swain, Provost

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What Works

the authors

The Pennsylvania State University Center for the Study of Higher Education "What Works" Resource Team

Carol L. Colbeck

Director, Senior Research Associate and Associate Professor

Colbeck is the director and a senior research associate in the Center for the Study of Higher Education, and associate professor of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University. Since 1996, she has been principal investigator or co-principal investigator of five research projects funded by the National Science Foundation, the U. S. Department of Education, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and Pennsylvania Department of Education. Colbeck's degrees are all from Stanford University (Calif.), including a B.A. in English (with distinction), an M.A. in Sociology, and a Ph.D. in Administration and Policy Analysis. She conducts research and teaches in the areas of organizational theory, curriculum, teaching and learning, and academic work roles.

Helen Spangler Caffrey

Director of External Affairs

Caffrey holds a B.A. from Goucher College (Md.) with concentration in Economics and Political Science and an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Lebanon Valley College (Penn.). Her role in education policy development for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania spans eighteen years as the executive director of Senate Education and seven years as a member of the State Board of Education and chair of the Higher Education Council. She has worked collaboratively with key state and federal agencies and associations. On special assignment from the President's office and as a member of the Center for the Study of Higher Education, she works in strategic ways to advance the Center's research initiatives. She has designed and works on research proposals that reflect the intersection of public policy and practice.

Donald E. Heller

Associate Professor and Senior Research Associate

Heller earned an Ed.D. in Higher Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Mass.), and holds an Ed.M. in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy from Harvard and a B.A. in Economics and Political Science from Tufts University (Mass.). Heller has earned a national reputation for his studies of higher education finance, tuition pricing, financial aid, and student access. Before his academic career, he spent a decade as an information technology manager at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Heller teaches and conducts research on issues relating to higher education economics, public policy, and finance, as well as academic and administrative uses of technology in higher education. The primary focus of his work is on issues of access and choice in postsecondary education, examining the factors and policies that help to determine whether or not individuals attend college, and what type of institution they attend. He has consulted on higher education policy issues with university systems and policy-making organizations in California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Tennessee.

Lisa R. Lattuca

Assistant Professor and Research Associate

Lattuca received a master's degree from Cornell University (N.Y.) in 1986 and a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Michigan in 1996, when she won the Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award from the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Lattuca does research and writes on postsecondary curricula, teaching and learning, interdisciplinary research and instruction, faculty work, and qualitative research methods. Her publications include four books: *College and University Curricula: Developing and Cultivating Programs of Study that Enhance Student Learning* (2002) (with co-editors J.G. Haworth and C.F. Conrad); *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching among College and University Faculty* (2001); *Qualitative Research in Higher*

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Education: Expanding Perspectives (2001) (with co-editors C.F. Conrad and J.G. Haworth); and *Shaping the College Curriculum: Academic Plans in Action* (1997) (with co-author J.S. Stark).

Robert Reason

Assistant Professor and Research Associate

Reason received a master's degree from Mankato State University (Minn.) and a Ph.D. in High Education from Iowa State. Prior to returning to his doctoral studies, he gained seven years of student affairs practitioner experience, primarily in residence life. He is a member of a research team for the Hallmarks of Excellence Project, which seeks to define excellence in first-year higher education. He teaches courses related to student development in college, counseling for college student affairs professionals, and students in American higher education. At Penn State, he coordinates the M.Ed. in higher education (Administration and Leadership) option in the Pennsylvania State University Program in Student Affairs. Reason studies student development in college environments, specifically related to the development of multicultural competence, as well as salary and representational equity in the Senior Student Affairs Officer position.

Linda C. Strauss

Senior Project Associate

Strauss earned her M.Ed in counseling education and Ph.D in Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University. She has more than ten years of administrative and research experience, including director of the Equal Opportunity Program, and the Learning Edge Academic Program. In 1998, Strauss was selected as an administrative fellow to Penn State's Senior Vice President of Finance and Business/ Treasurer. She has published on topics ranging from the impact of institutional and student characteristics on student outcomes to racial identity development. She has co-authored several book chapters and published in *Research in Higher Education* and the *Journal of Higher Education.* Her research interests include athletic administration, institutional research, racial identity development, and engineering accreditation. Most recently, Strauss served as an institutional research consultant to the Pennsylvania State University Office of Undergraduate Education. She teaches a course on research and assessment in student affairs for the graduate program in Higher Education.

Patrick T. Terenzini

Professor and Senior Scientist

Terenzini has over 25 years of experience in higher education as a teacher, researcher, and administrator. He holds an A.B. in English from Dartmouth College (N.H.), an M.A.T. in English education from Harvard University (Mass.), and a Ph.D. in higher education from Syracuse University (N.Y). His research interests include the impact of college on students, student retention, institutional research and planning, and the assessment of student learning outcomes. He has published over 90 articles in refereed journals and made numerous invited presentations at national scholarly and professional conferences. Terenzini is (or has been) a member of the editorial boards of *Research in Higher Education*, the *Review of Higher Education*, and *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research.* From 1984-1996, he was editor-in-chief of *New Directions for Institutional Research.* He is co-author (with Ernest T. Pascarella) of *How College Affects Students* (Jossey-Bass, 1991), an award-winning synthesis of 20 years of research on the impacts of the college experience on students. Terenzini is also a past president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

J. Fredericks Volkweinm

Professor and Senior Scientist

Volkwein is professor of education and senior scientist in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University. After receiving a bachelor's degree from Pomona College (Calif.) and a Ph.D. from Cornell University (N.Y), he held, for more than thirty years, a variety of administrative posts, including director of Institutional Research. Volkwein has produced more than 100 research reports, conference papers, journal articles, and book reviews. He is co-principal investigator for the multi-year study of the impact of outcomes-based accreditation standards established by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). All his research and teaching is related, directly or indirectly, to the topic of organizational effectiveness. Volkwein has served as a consulting editor for three higher education journals, and in 1995 became the new editor-in chief of the Jossey-Bass series, *New Directions for Institutional Research.*

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American Association of State Colleges and Universities Staff

Travis Reindl

Director of State Policy Analysis
and Assistant to the President

Reindl is the director of State Policy Analysis and assistant to the President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Reindl leads the tracking and analysis of state higher education policy, specializing in institutional and student finance issues. Additionally, Reindl monitors federal policy in the areas of college tuition/rates, campus security, and student privacy for the association. Prior to joining AASCU in 1997, Reindl served as director of Information and Institutional Research for the South Dakota Board of Regents. Reindl holds a B.A. in Government from the University of Notre Dame (Ill.) and a Master's of Public Policy from the University of Maryland - College Park.

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American Association of State Colleges and Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW • Fifth Floor • Washington, DC 20005-4701
202.293.7070 • fax 202.296.5819 • aascu.org

Pennsylvania State University Center for the Study of Higher Education
400 Rackley Building • University Park, PA 16802-3202
814.865.6346 • fax 814.865.3638 • ed.psu.edu/cshe/index.htm

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